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PROTECT AGAINST ANIMAL BITES, RABIES EXPOSURE

Contact:

Media Desk: 850-595-6500x6000

Public Contact: 850-595-6700



Pensacola, Fla. – The Florida Department of Health in Escambia County (FDOH-Escambia) urges residents and visitors to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure by avoiding contact with wild and stray animals. Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system. Without proper treatment, rabies can cause brain infection and death. Rabies is transmitted from animals to humans through a bite, a scratch, or by contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth.

In Florida, raccoons, foxes, bats, and cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include dogs, bobcats, skunks, and otters. Because of their proximity to people, stray and unvaccinated cats and dogs pose a special risk. While animals with active rabies often exhibit unusual behavior, some animals such as bats, can be carriers of the virus. In such situations, rabies transmission could occur when the saliva, or other secretion(s), from such an animal comes into contact with a person's mucous membranes or open wound.

"Rabies is usually a fatal infection but is preventable," notes Dr. John J. Lanza, Director of the Florida Department of Health in Escambia County. "We continuously encourage everyone to immediately seek proper medical attention if bitten by an unvaccinated animal. However, it is also important to stress prevention as the primary method of avoiding rabies infection. Bats, and other wild and feral animals including cats should be avoided regardless of whether they are exhibiting signs of rabies infection."

You cannot always tell if an animal has rabies by looking at it. To protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies follow these steps:

- Teach your children not to go near wild and stray animals, and never keep them as pets.
- If you have bats in your home or workplace, contact animal control or an animal removal professional for advice on when and how to have the bats removed.
- Vaccinate your dog, cat, ferret, or horse to protect against rabies.
- Do not feed your pets outside. The food may attract wild animals.
- Make sure your garbage is securely covered. Open garbage attracts wild and stray animals.
- Do not let your pets roam freely. Keep them in a fenced yard or on a leash at all times.
- Spay or neuter your pet to reduce its tendency to roam or fight.
- If you are bitten by a wild animal, or by any animal that is acting strangely, seek medical care as soon as possible so that a physician can evaluate your risk of rabies infection and administer the rabies vaccine if appropriate.

FDOH-Escambia's Environmental Health division investigates animal bite reports, tests animals for rabies through the state laboratory, and orders animal quarantine as necessary. For more information, or to report an animal bite, contact the FDOH-Escambia Environmental Health office at 850-595-6700 or visit www.EscambiaHealth.com.

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